

Proposed Montrose Quarry Expansion

Montrose Environmental Group, inc. 9th May 2005

Boral's campaign to expand Montrose Quarry southwards is pressing on at a rapid pace. They have released consultants' reports in draft form about:

- Air pollution;
- Greenhouse gases;
- Noise;
- Blasting and vibration;
- Visual impact;
- Native flora and fauna (excluding Bungalook Creek);
- Falling groundwater;
- Hydrology and water quality (including impacts on Bungalook Ck);
- Economic issues;
- Social issues;
- Cultural heritage;
- Town planning issues;
- Options for the site after quarrying ceases; and
- Traffic.

These reports are of highly variable standard, varying from quite professional and complete, to poorly researched first drafts whose authors simply reassure us that they'll get things right before the final reports are released. The quality of reports on economics, town planning and social impacts are of particular concern.

However, the issues with the greatest potential to obstruct Boral's plans are the health effects of air pollution and the destruction of a threatened vegetation community.

Health Effects Report Omitted

Boral recently declared that they are not going to proceed with their planned release of a consultant's report on health effects. The effects of quarry dust on health are the most widely held concern about the quarry's impacts, based on public comments at 'community workshops' convened by Boral earlier this year. Dust from quarries is regulated by the EPA because it contains a known human carcinogen (crystalline silica) and presents risks of disease to the lungs, heart and circulatory system.

Boral has decided not to release an independent report on health effects. Boral stated that the previously foreshadowed independent report on health is no longer deemed necessary because calculations have been done by Boral determining that the health risk is too low to warrant further examination.

Montrose Environmental Group inc (MEG) condemns this situation as thumbing Boral's nose at the community about their deepest concern regarding the quarry.

Air Pollution Assessment Questioned

Boral's consultant, Dr Graeme Ross, has used computer projections to predict concentrations of health-affecting dust (technically called 'PM₁₀') from the expanded quarry. The predictions sometimes exceed the EPA's 'Intervention Level' of 60 micrograms per cubic metre on neighbouring industrial land, and approach this level on residential land.

MEG's technical advisor, Dr Graeme Lorimer, says that the predictions tend to underestimate the true impact because the contribution of airborne particles from other sources has been artificially diminished in the calculations.

MEG also questions why the EPA has chosen to judge the quarry's PM₁₀ pollution against the Intervention Level, which is defined in regulations* as the level at which the EPA should consider intervening to clean up emissions.

PM₁₀ from industrial chimneys is judged against a substantially stricter standard. Montrose Quarry includes a chimney on its asphalt plant, but EPA officer says the stricter standard is not being applied to the chimney because the asphalt plant is being excluded from the EES. MEG wants to know why, saying that the plant is an integral part of the quarry and the proposed quarry expansion represents an expansion of the life of the asphalt plant. A substantial fraction of the quarry's stone is sold in the form of asphalt from the plant.

Dr Lorimer says that the computer calculations of PM₁₀ dust around the quarry breach the regulatory health standard that would apply if the Asphalt Plant were to be judged against the regulatory standard for chimneys.

Threatened Vegetation to be Destroyed

The area that Boral wants to quarry contains 'Grassy Forest', a listed threatened plant community. The State government's 'Native Vegetation Framework' policy says that damage to such a community in reasonable ecological condition (as in this case) can only be permitted with Ministerial-level intervention on the basis of matters of statewide significance. MEG says that this, on its own, should be enough to reject the quarry expansion.

In addition, on the banks of Bungalook Ck next to the quarry expansion area, groundwater depletion caused by the quarry expansion threatens another vegetation community that is listed as threatened. This community is also known, high-quality habitat for the rare Powerful Owl (see below).

Boral's consultants are trying to devise a means of pumping water back into the creekline vegetation, in perpetuity, to prevent it drying out and dying. The consultants have not found anywhere else where such techniques have been tried. It is not clear who would be responsible for ensuring that the pumping continues in perpetuity.

MEG questions the reliability or sense of leaving future generations to maintain an unproven pumping project indefinitely for the sake of this generation's short-term access to stone.

Powerful Owl Habitat to be Destroyed

The Powerful Owl is a species of large, rare bird, known to frequent the area of the proposed quarry expansion. Its prey can be as large as a domestic cat. Some of its habitat would become a hole in the ground if the quarry expands, and high-quality habitat along Bungalook Ck is at risk from groundwater depletion as described above.

Councillors Urged to Stop the EES Process

At the end this month (May 2005), Boral plans to formally request the Shire of Yarra Ranges to initiate a planning scheme amendment to facilitate the quarry expansion.

MEG is requesting Councillors to reject this request.

Otherwise, the consultants' reports will be put out for public comment and an Environmental Effects Statement panel will conduct hearings to decide what it thinks Council and other agencies should do. In this event, MEG would still request Councillors to reject the expansion after the panel recommendations are released.

Further Information:

* State Environment Protection Policy (Air Quality Management) 2001